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Project Directors: Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Michigan State University
Barbara Rockenbach, Columbia University Libraries

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Sustainability, Solidarity, and Community in Higher Education¹

Kathleen Fitzpatrick

Rebuilding a relationship of trust between higher education institutions and the public they ostensibly serve is going to require that we reground our institutions and the work that we do in them. This will involve what I call *generous thinking*: focusing our practices and our modes of communicating around building sustainability, solidarity, and community both on campus and across campuses. This will also demand a *radical approach*.² The necessary change can't be made incrementally but instead requires a paradigm shift—as Chris Newfield notes in the conclusion to his book about public universities, *The Great Mistake*.³ Currently there is no route, no approach, no tool that can take us from where we are to where we need to be.

As Tressie McMillan Cottom has noted of the crisis that she has seen growing in higher education today: “This is not a problem for a technological innovation or a market product. This requires politics.”⁴ The problem, after all, *begins* with politics: the American public university that not too long ago served as a highly accessible engine of social mobility, making a liberal-arts-based education broadly available, has been utterly undone. Today we are facing not just a drastic reduction in that institution's affordability but also an increasing threat to its very public orientation. Rampant privatization is shifting the burden of paying for higher education from the state to individual students and families and is turning the work of the institution from the creation of a shared social good—a broadly educated public—to the production of market-oriented individual benefit.

¹ This white paper is adapted from Kathleen Fitzpatrick, “[Generous Thinking: Sustainability, Solidarity, and the Common Good](#)” (opening plenary, CNI Spring 2019 Membership Meeting, St. Louis, MO, April 8, 2019), and was published in *EDUCAUSE Review* (vol. 54, no. 3, Summer 2019).

² Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *Generous Thinking: A Radical Approach to Saving the University* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019).

³ Christopher Newfield, *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).

⁴ Tressie McMillan Cottom, *Lower Ed: The Troubling Rise of For-Profit Colleges in the New Economy* (New York: New Press, 2017), p. 182.

This turn from a focus on a social good to privileging individual benefit is by no means restricted to higher education today. As a new project that I'm beginning to research explores, this turn characterizes contemporary Internet culture as well; whatever the original expectations for "social media" may have been, a significant part of what has led us to the mess we find ourselves in today — with corporate entities tracking our every move while ignoring (or abetting) the growth of violent radical movements just under the surface, undermining not just how we interact with one another in casual ways but the very organization of our formal, public, political lives — is a desperately flawed model of sociality, one that is in fact not just *un*-social but *anti*-social. These structures allow us to talk to one another and to form connections with those who share our interests and concerns, for sure, but they are predicated on a hyperindividualism that is not just contrary to but actually corrosive of the kinds of deliberation necessary to a productive public life.⁵

It's bad enough that this failure of sociality dominates so much of our online experience, but the damage does not stop there. Hyperindividualism affects our colleges and universities as well. It's one reason among many, I believe, that we are facing what *Inside Higher Ed* has called "a larger than typical decline in confidence in an American institution in a relatively short time period" according to a 2018 Gallup poll.⁶ This falling confidence cannot be simply dismissed as evidence of an increasingly entrenched anti-intellectualism in American life—though without doubt, there is that too. Rather it must be understood as evidence that higher education has, for the last several decades, been operating simultaneously under two conflicting paradigms. On the one hand is an older paradigm, largely operative within the academic community, in which colleges and universities serve as producers and disseminators of knowledge; on the other hand is a more recent paradigm in which colleges and universities serve as producers and disseminators of market-oriented credentials designed to promote individual gain. The crisis in higher education today stems from the incommensurability of these two paradigms and also from the fact that *both of them are failing*, if in different ways.

More than fifty years ago, Thomas Kuhn noted in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* that as a scientific paradigm becomes beset by anomalies for which the paradigm cannot account, the community that relies on that paradigm is thrown into crisis.⁷ The resolution

⁵ Kathleen Fitzpatrick, "[We Have Never Been Social](#)," June 10, 2019.

⁶ Scott Jaschik, "[Falling Confidence in Higher Ed](#)," *Inside Higher Ed*, October 9, 2018.

⁷ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

of that crisis requires the discovery of an entirely new model, one that can reorder the work done by the community and that can draw the community out of what Kuhn describes as the “period of pronounced professional insecurity” that appears when normal science ceases to function normally. In Kuhn’s model, this crisis can be resolved only by what he famously called a *paradigm shift*, the cataclysmic transformation from one way of understanding how science operates to another. I believe we are desperately in need of such a paradigm shift if higher education, as we want it to be, is to survive. All of us who care about the future of higher education—faculty, staff, administrators, students, parents, policymakers, trustees, and more—must reorient our thinking about the work of colleges and universities. This work needs to transition from a focus on the creation of *individual* benefit, grounded in all of the competition that structures every aspect of life in contemporary higher education institutions, to a focus on the college/university’s role in building *community*.

Some of my thoughts about sustainability, solidarity, and community have evolved from my work over the last several years with [Humanities Commons](#), a nonprofit, community-developed and community-governed network serving humanities scholars and organizations. Humanities Commons aspires to two of my own beliefs: first, that higher education, along with the individual scholars and instructors engaged in it, will benefit from all of us doing more of our work in public, where the publics that we need to support our institutions can begin to see the significance of what we do; and second, that higher education leaders must do everything they can to resist and reverse the privatization that has overtaken their institutions, restoring service to the public good not just in their mission statements but in the heart of their actual missions. Only this return to a fully public orientation—even among those colleges and universities that we call “private”—can allow us to build the kind of community that can sustain them.

Part of resisting privatization, for both scholars and their institutions, involves turning away from some of the externally developed and deployed systems on which we have become dependent and instead reserving our investments, and our labor, for systems and platforms and infrastructures whose missions genuinely align with our own, whose values mirror our own, and to whose governance we can contribute. We need collectively to turn our attention to developing the shared, publicly oriented systems that we can count on to support us as we develop new modes of open knowledge sharing, modes that might help higher education return to its mission of public service. But developing this form of community-supported infrastructure will require some careful thinking about the

relationships that will be essential to build and maintain it and the work that will be necessary to make the infrastructure sustainable.

The issues that I'm discussing had been developing for quite some time, but they came into stark visibility for me in August 2017, when [bepress](#) announced that it had been purchased by [RELX](#), formerly known as Reed Elsevier and the multinational parent company of the publishing behemoth [Elsevier](#). Bepress was founded in 1999 by three UC Berkeley professors in order to provide open-access publishing and repository services to higher education institutions. Bepress thus grew out of the academy and was widely seen as operating with the values of the academy at its heart. As the bepress website notes, over 500 institutions have purchased bepress services in order to disseminate and preserve the work being done on their campuses in openly accessible ways. But in one fell swoop in August 2017, these 500 institutions discovered that they were now effectively paying Elsevier for the ability to provide an open alternative to the increasingly monopolistic scholarly communication channels owned by corporate publishers^[TD8] such as Elsevier.

What had served for years as a key piece of scholarly infrastructure—built and run by academics, for the academic community—appeared to have been turned on that community. It's not as though anyone was unaware that bepress was a commercial service all along, but it was viewed as one of the “good guys,” and the costs of outsourcing infrastructural needs to them had been balanced against the often impossible task of maintaining locally hosted repository and publishing systems. Bepress provided what many saw as best-of-breed functionality at a reasonable price, and it supported library leaders' desire to connect the gathering and preservation of research materials with the ability to make them openly available to the world. But the acquisition of bepress by RELX put library leaders in the position of unintentionally supporting a growing corporate control not just of scholarly publishing but of the entirety of the research workflow, from discovery through production to communication. In addition, the acquisition left them anxious about their fundamental ability to control the infrastructures on which they rely in promoting greater public access to scholarship produced on their campuses. As a result, serious conversations have since focused on means of supporting open-source, academy-owned, and academy-controlled infrastructure.

This is not an impossible move, by any stretch, but it's harder than it might sound. Long-standing open-access, open-infrastructure projects like [arXiv](#) point to some possible areas

of concern. By every reasonable measure, arXiv has been exemplary—in its uptake, in its independence, and in the ways that it has helped to transform the fields that it serves. But in some crucial ways, arXiv has experienced what can only be called “catastrophic success”—a crucial, paradigm-shifting project whose growing annual operating costs and mounting infrastructural requirements have demanded increasingly creative mechanisms to support the platform. So in 2010, the arXiv team at Cornell began the challenging process of building a coalition of libraries willing to work together to support the resource. But our institutions, as we unfortunately know, are largely not structured to support this work of cross-institutional collaboration. First, they’re far more prone to treat such resources as grounds for competition and so become possessive of them. Second, the community-building required in order to collaborate becomes yet another form of labor added on top of maintaining the resources themselves. I do not know the extent to which such difficulties may have played a role in arXiv’s January 2019 move from the Cornell University Library to Cornell Computing and Information Science. It’s entirely likely that the move is a matter of infrastructural pragmatics. Even so, the challenges of maintaining the kind of cross-institutional coalition that is necessary to sustain such a crucial resource remain.

Another example, with a different narrative, can be found in the [Samvera](#) project. Recognizing that no single institution could possibly develop the full suite of systems on which institutional repositories rely, developers at several institutions came together to create a collective solution. As the proverb and the [Samvera website](#) have it, if you want to go far, go together. But this distributed developer community, like all other such communities, has faced some challenges in coordination—challenges that have caused it, as the proverb also reminds us, to go more slowly than it might. Ensuring the ongoing commitment not just of the individual developers involved in the project but also of the institutions for which the developers work is not a simple matter.

The foundation of the challenges that arXiv and Samvera have faced is the same as that faced by any number of other projects and programs and initiatives: *sustainability*. This is an issue I’ve been thinking a fair bit about of late, again as a result of my involvement with Humanities Commons. My colleagues and I have been working to ensure that Humanities Commons will be able to thrive well into the future. Those attempts have in turn been encouraged by the funders and other organizations that have supported the network’s development to this point; they too would like to see the network thrive, but they cannot support it indefinitely. We need, they reasonably suggest, a plan for demonstrating that the network will, at some point in the future, be able to support itself.

Sustainability of this sort is tied up in revenue models, in business plans, in cost recovery. For a nonprofit entity, sustainability is forever tied to economic concerns that are very often divergent from, if not at odds with, the nonprofit's primary mission. As a result, these nonprofits remain precarious; one small miscalculation can make the difference between survival and collapse. But sustainability broadly understood extends to domains beyond the economic. There is *environmental sustainability*, in which we attempt to ensure that we do not consume more resources than can be developed and that we do not produce more waste than can be managed in the near term. There's also *technological sustainability*, in which we attempt to ensure that projects conform to commonly accepted standards that will enable the future stability and growth of those projects.

All of these forms of sustainability are important, to varying degrees, to providing for the future of nonprofit and open-source projects. But there's another form that gets a good bit less attention, and that I increasingly think precedes economic or environmental or technical sustainability: *social sustainability*. The social aspect points not just to the determination of a group of people to support a particular project, but to the determination of those people to support their groupness; not just to their commitment to the thing they're doing together, but to their commitment to the concept of "together" in the first place. Ensuring that these commitments are sustained is a necessary precondition for the other kinds of sustainability that we're hoping to work toward.

This notion—of the role of "community" in community-supported software and of the best ways of building and sustaining community—raises the key question of what we mean when we talk about community. As Miranda Joseph argues in *Against the Romance of Community*, the concept is often invoked as a placeholder for something that exists outside the dominant economic and institutional structures of contemporary life, a set of ostensibly organic felt relationships that harken back to a mythical premodern moment in which people lived and worked in direct connection with one another, without the mediating forces of modern capitalism.⁸ "Community" in this sense, and in Benedict Anderson's sense,⁹ is an imagined relationship, and even an imaginary one, as its invocation is designed to yoke together bodies whose existence as a group is largely constructed. It's a concept often used both idealistically and as a form of discipline, a

⁸ Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

claim of unity that smooths over and thus suppresses internal difference and disagreement. As Joseph points out, the notion of community is often deployed as if the relationships that it describes could provide an antidote to or an escape from the problems created by contemporary political and economic life. But this suggestion serves to distract us from the supplementary role that community in fact serves with respect to capitalism, filling its gaps and smoothing over its flaws in ways that permit capitalism to function without real opposition. So we call upon the community to support projects that the dominant institutions of the mainstream economy will not. And this is how we ended up here: conducting fundraising campaigns on social media to support people facing major health crises, rather than demanding universal health care; and holding bake sales to supplement funding of elementary schools, rather than calling for full funding for education. “Community” becomes, in this sense, an alibi for the creeping privatization of what should be social responsibilities.

We must be careful in issuing calls to build community. Such calls, put forth uncritically, not only run the risk of enabling the institutions that structure contemporary life to absolve themselves of responsibility for public care but also run the risk of essentializing a highly complex and intersectional set of social relations, treating those relations as if they were a simple, single thing. At the same time, some important uses for the notion of community remain, uses that might benefit from an analogy to Gayatri Spivak’s “strategic essentialism.”¹⁰ In these uses we might simultaneously recognize that whereas our calls to community are flawed, in fact impossible, they are nonetheless useful as organizing tools. We might thus begin to think of the call to community not as an invocation of organic unity but instead as a form of building coalitions, of developing solidarity.

Solidarity itself is a challenged concept: there are important questions to be asked about solidarity with whom and for whom. Women of color, for instance, have pointed out the extent to which white feminist appeals to solidarity reinforce white supremacy and demand that black women put the issue of race aside in favor of a gender-based unity that overwhelmingly serves white women’s interests. Indeed, the author Mikki Kendall established the Twitter hashtag #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen in order to call attention to such demands. So I don’t want to make it sound as though “solidarity” can serve as an unproblematic substitute for “community.” I remain convinced, however, that there are stronger forms of solidarity to be found, forms that do not demand that individuals

¹⁰ See Sara Danus and Stefan Jonsson, “[An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak](#),” *boundary 2*, vol. 20, no. 2 (Summer 1993).

seeking redress for institutionalized injustices drop their own issues and get in line. Instead, these forms of solidarity recognize that the issues raised by those individuals are issues for all of us and that we must stand together in support of needs that may not necessarily seem to be our own. And this is the form of solidarity that I'm seeking, a form that I believe is a prerequisite for successful, sustainable development of nonprofit, open-source, community-owned networks and platforms.

What's the connection? For me, sustainability and solidarity connect through the work of Elinor Ostrom. Ostrom was not just the first woman to win the Nobel Prize in economics; she remains (to date) the *only* female Nobel laureate in the field. Her work focused on common-pool resource management. She argued fiercely against the conventional wisdom that the so-called tragedy of the commons was an inevitability, insisting that community-based systems and structures for ensuring the sustainability of resources were possible, provided the right modes of self-organization and self-governance were in place.

First let's focus a bit on what is meant by the notion of *common-pool resources*. Resources are generally understood by economists to fall into one of four categories, based on whether the resources are excludable (i.e., whether individuals can be prevented from using them) and whether they are rivalrous (i.e., whether one individual's use precludes another's). First, *public goods* are those resources that are both nonexcludable and nonrivalrous, meaning that no one can be prevented from using them and that no one's use reduces the availability of the resources for use by others. Second, *private goods* are both excludable and rivalrous; they can be restricted for use by paying customers, and their consumption by one customer can diminish the availability of the resources for another customer. These private goods are market-based products, typically produced and distributed for profit. Third, *club goods* are those that are excludable but nonrivalrous—those that are restricted to paying customers but are not diminished by any one customer's use. And finally, goods that are nonexcludable but rivalrous are *common-pool resources*: it is these goods to which the “tragedy of the commons”—the overuse of shared natural resources—can apply.

At the root of the tragedy of the commons lies the “free-rider problem,” which derives from the assumption that when individuals cannot be prevented from using commonly held resources, but also cannot be compelled to contribute to them, some number of individuals will avail themselves of the resources without contributing to the support of those resources. As the number of free-riders grows, the resources become prone to

overuse and eventually become unsustainable. Before Ostrom, the only means imagined to help prevent the tragedy of the commons was external regulation, whether through privatization or nationalization. But as Ostrom argued in her 1990 book *Governing the Commons*, this model—like other models such as the “prisoner’s dilemma”—was based on a particular, and particularly pessimistic, view of human possibility, one that could not escape from its own metaphor.

What makes these models so dangerous—when they are used metaphorically as the foundation for policy—is that the constraints that are assumed to be fixed for the purpose of analysis are taken on faith as being fixed in empirical settings, unless external authorities change them. . . . I would rather address the question of how to enhance the capabilities of those involved to change the constraining rules of the game to lead to outcomes other than remorseless tragedies.¹¹

Ostrom’s work thus explored ways of organizing collective action that might ensure the sustainability of commonly held resources. And while Ostrom focused on natural resources, such as fisheries, the problems she described, and the potential solutions she explored, have some important issues in common with institutions of higher education and the nonprofit, community-developed, academy-owned software projects—like arXiv, like Samvera, like Humanities Commons—on which these institutions should be able to rely.

Many examples of free and open digital scholarly platforms and projects like these exist, all of which face a common problem: while there is often sufficient support available for building and implementing such systems, there aren’t funding programs designed to ensure that they can be maintained. As a result, the tools and platforms accrue technical debt that becomes increasingly difficult to manage, making the projects appear unsustainable and leaving them in danger of obsolescence. Some argue that the best means of ensuring the sustainability of such projects is economic: simply eliminate the free-rider problem by enclosing the commons, requiring individuals or institutions to pay in order to access them. But this privatization is, in many cases, the exact problem that community-developed projects were developed to evade. It is incumbent on us to find the self-organization and self-governance models that can keep these projects open and thriving.

¹¹ Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 6–7.

In July 2018 Brett Bobley, chief information officer for the National Endowment for the Humanities and director of the Office of Digital Humanities, tweeted a question about how to sustain critical scholarly infrastructure. Numerous discussions and threads resulted from that question (all worth reading), but one that particularly caught my attention stems from this reply by Hugh Cayless, [senior digital humanities developer at Duke Collaboratory for Classics Computing \(DC3\)](#):

Would entail (I think) institutions willing to take responsibility for critical scholarly infrastructure components, fund their maintenance, and give credit to the maintainers. Components die because all that drives them is passion and uncompensated (invisible) labor.¹²

I absolutely agree, especially when Cayless moves beyond the economic sphere into issues of labor and credit. However, individual institutions cannot manage such responsibilities on their own. Cross-institutional collaborations are required to keep open-source software projects sustainable, and those collaborations demand that the staff participating in them not only be credited and paid appropriately for their labor but also—most challengingly—be supported in dedicating some portion of their labor to the collective good, rather than strictly to local requirements.

College and university leaders must understand themselves to be part of a community of higher education institutions, and they need to act in solidarity with that community. This is why I argue that sustainability in open-source development has solidarity as a prerequisite: the interests of the group require commitment from its members to that group, at times over and above their individual interests. I'm thinking about how we foster that commitment: how, in fact, do we understand that commitment itself as a crucial form of social sustainability?

Getting our institutions to stop competing with one another and to start recognizing that they have more to gain from collaboration than they stand to lose in the rankings is no easy task. The privatization that has gradually overtaken higher education since the Reagan era has resulted in a fundamentally market-oriented, competition-based approach to everything a college or university does. This approach must be set aside. Making this argument is a huge part of what we're trying to instantiate in Humanities Commons.

¹² Hugh Cayless (hcayless), *Twitter*, [July 18, 2018](#).

Humanities Commons was developed as a project of the office of scholarly communication at the Modern Language Association (MLA). The MLA is the largest scholarly society in the humanities, representing approximately 25,000 scholars across North America and around the world, members who teach and study a wide range of languages, literatures, and cultures. In 2013, when I was director of scholarly communication at the MLA, we launched a social network, with support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, called MLA Commons. Our goal was to provide our members with a platform for communication and collaboration, both to extend year-round the kinds of conversations that take place at annual meetings and to provide a means for members to share their scholarly work with one another. Within about 30 seconds of launching the platform, however, we began to hear from our members about their desire to connect with colleagues in *other* areas in the humanities, so we started looking for ways to support those connections across disciplinary fields.

With further support from the Mellon Foundation, we undertook a planning process and developed a pilot project designed to connect multiple proprietary Commons “instances,” each serving the membership of a scholarly society. Humanities Commons went live in December 2016, linking MLA Commons with Commons spaces developed for the members of the Association for Jewish Studies, the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies, and the College Art Association. But in addition to working with these partners, we wanted to provide a space where any researchers or practitioners in the humanities could create an account and share their work, and so we decided to open the network’s hub to anyone who wanted to join—across disciplines, around the world, and regardless of institutional affiliation or organizational membership. All Humanities Commons members can take advantage of the network’s features. They can set up professional profiles, participate in group discussions, create websites, and deposit and share their work in the network’s open-access repository. This fusion of a social network with a library-quality repository (adhering to commonly accepted metadata standards and employing digital object identifiers) means not only that materials are being put into the repository, and not only that these materials can be found there, but also that the materials are being actively used, since there is a community with which they can be shared.

Fully opening the Humanities Commons hub to free participation by any interested scholar or practitioner has significantly driven the platform’s adoption and use: a little over two and a half years later, we have over 17,500 members.¹³ But doing so has also

¹³ And a year and a half further on, we have over 25,000 members.

created challenges for our sustainability. Partner organizations tend to see the value in paying to support the network's services as a way to provide a benefit for their members. This is understandable, since they need to provide such benefits in order to keep their dues-paying members. But this model transforms Humanities Commons from a common-pool resource into a club good, one whose benefits are exclusive to those who pay. And we're hearing that many of the organizations that might have paid for the network if it were an exclusive service see the openness of the hub as diminishing the network's value to them, rather than recognizing that the network effects of a larger, more open community will ultimately serve their long-term interests.

As a result, we've been working to develop a model that will encourage organizations and institutions to invest in the network, to support it in an ongoing way, and to recognize not only that they belong to the network but also that the network belongs to them and that its future depends on them. Making that case requires not just a workable revenue model but, far more importantly, a compelling governance model, one that gives member organizations and institutions, as well as individual members, a voice in the network's future and a stake in its outcomes. As Ostrom argues, a path to sustainability for a common-pool resource like Humanities Commons requires us to recognize that building the network's community and enabling it to become self-governing is a precondition for its success.

The future of Humanities Commons, like the future of a host of other open-source software and community-supported infrastructure projects, requires its participants to act in the interest of the collective, even when those interests do not immediately appear to be local. This form of solidarity is where real sustainability for academy-owned infrastructure—and for the academy itself—lies. The road ahead is rough. I'm asking colleges and universities as institutions to undergo a fairly radical transformation, fully aligning their internal reward structures with the public mission they claim to espouse. And this is where the need for a paradigm shift—the need for politics—arises.

This is the conclusion reached by a study entitled “How Significant Are the Public Dimensions of Faculty Work in Review, Promotion, and Tenure Documents?” The answer? Not very. The study demonstrates the extent to which “institutions that want to live up to their public mission need to work toward systemic change in how faculty work is assessed and incentivized.”¹⁴ No doubt all of us could tell stories that support this

¹⁴ Juan Pablo Alperin et al., “[How Significant Are the Public Dimensions of Faculty Work in Review, Promotion, and Tenure Documents?](#),” *Humanities Commons* [preprint], 2018.

conclusion, stories that illustrate the ways in which the kinds of collaborative work that might best support the college/university's need for a more open, publicly oriented future goes un- or under-rewarded.

Here's my story. Right around the time I began sketching the outline for my book *Generous Thinking*, I attended a day-long workshop on new models for open scholarly communication. The provost of a large state research university had been invited to give a keynote address. The provost described his campus's efforts to embrace a renewed mission of public service, and he emphasized the role that broad public access to the faculty's work might play in transforming the environment in which the university operates today. The university's singular purpose is the public good, he said, but he noted that those of us in higher education are often seen as being self-interested. He asked: can opening up our work to the world help change the public discourse about us? It was an inspiring talk, both rich in its analysis of how the university found its way into the economic and social problems it now faces and hopeful in its thinking about new possibilities for renewed public commitment.

Right up until the moment when the relationship between scholarly publishing and tenure and promotion was raised. And then it was as though someone had dimmed the lights: we heard about the importance of maintaining prestige within the faculty through assessment that ensures faculty members are publishing in the highest-ranked venues. Frustrated by that shift in tone, I asked the provost what the possibilities might be for a very important, highly visible research university-- one that understands its primary mission to be service to the public good—to remove the tenure and promotion logjam in the transformation of scholarly communication by convening the entire academic campus, from the provost through the deans, chairs, and faculty, in a collective project of revising—really, reimagining—all of its personnel processes and the standards on which they rely in light of a primary emphasis on the public good. What would become possible if all of those policies worked to ensure that what was considered to be “excellence” in research and teaching had its basis in the university's core service mission? The provost's response was, basically, that any institution that took on such a project would immediately lose competitiveness within its institutional cohort.

To say that this response was disappointing to me would be an understatement, but it was honest, if nothing else. It clearly stated where the rubber meets the road for most research universities and why lots of our talk about openness, impact, public service, and generosity falls apart at the point where it crosses paths with the more entrenched, if

unspoken, principles around which our institutions are arranged today. The inability of higher education leaders to transform their internal institutional structures and processes in order to fully align with their stated institutional mission and values may mean that they have not in fact fully embraced that mission or those values. Or perhaps the problem is that there is a shadow mission—competition—that excludes the possibility of full alignment.

The worst of it for me was that the provost was correct. As currently structured, the entire system of higher education is engineered—from individual institutions to accrediting agencies, funding bodies, and the higher education press—to promote a certain kind of competitiveness that relies on a certain kind of prestige. Any institution that seeks to transform the rules or the goals of the competition without dramatically altering its relationship to the system as a whole is likely to suffer. What Newfield has described as the mandate to “compete all the time” forecloses a whole range of opportunities for our institutions, preventing them from taking any other approach.¹⁵

The real threat to institutions of higher education today is not other institutions of higher education, and it is not their place in the rankings. Rather, the real threat is the creeping forces of privatization that continue to undermine our public mission. If we are to reclaim that mission, to reclaim control of the work produced in and by our colleges and universities, we must do so as a sector, acting not just in solidarity with but in generosity toward the other institutions to which we are inevitably connected and also toward the public that we all jointly serve. If we are going to develop community-supported infrastructure for sustainability, we must genuinely become, and act as, a community. None of this will be easy—but the alternatives, which have been building over the last several years, will be far worse.

¹⁵ Newfield, *The Great Mistake*, p. 144.